



A Survey of Selected Work Readiness Certificates

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Disclaimer: The data collected, recommendations, and opinions expressed in this report are the work of the authors and do not represent those of the United Way of Rhode Island.



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A Survey of Selected Work Readiness Certificates

Introduction

The United Way of Rhode Island asked Jobs for the Future to prepare a scan of work readiness certificates that have emerged throughout the United States in recent years. Like many other states, Rhode Island finds itself challenged by employers who are demanding “work-ready” job candidates and significant numbers of residents who have trouble getting a job due to lack of educational and professional credentials. While individual education and training programs have developed their own work readiness and outcome standards, there is no standard definition, accepted across the spectrum of programs funded by workforce development, vocational rehabilitation, and adult and higher education, to certify that an individual has the basic employability skills sought by Rhode Island employers.

The state’s policymakers and service providers—including the Governor’s Workforce Board, the Department of Labor and Training, the Department of Adult Education, and numerous nonprofit agencies—have become increasingly intrigued by the myriad work readiness certificates that are in use or being developed nationwide. Their interest centers on the idea that such certificates have the potential to increase the “employability” of residents who lack a postsecondary credential.

In today’s information-based economy, the labor market is almost unrecognizable compared to just a few decades ago. With the exception of some niche sectors, Rhode Island job seekers have watched the state’s long tradition in manufacturing decline steadily. On the other hand, employment opportunities are growing in health care and social assistance; educational services; construction; accommodation and food services; retail trade; finance, insurance, and real estate; and professional and business services (Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training, Labor Market Information Unit n.d.).

In this new labor market, too many job seekers find their lack of a high school or higher credential a formidable barrier to accessing, retaining, and succeeding in family-sustaining jobs in these growing industries. In 2000, only 27.8 percent of Rhode Island residents age 25 and over had a high school or equivalent diploma as their highest level of educational attainment (U.S. Census Bureau n.d.). In addition, the disparities in educational attainment among the state’s communities in that same year are alarming. For example, 37 percent of Hopkinton residents age 25+ had a high school or equivalent diploma as their highest level of educational attainment, compared to 15 percent in East Greenwich. In Central Falls, 51 percent of residents age 25+ lacked a high school diploma in 2000, and 24 percent had less than a ninth-grade education (Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training, Labor Market Information Unit 2005).

Given these figures, and the urgent need for unemployed and underemployed residents to find sustainable employment, a diverse group of Rhode Island stakeholders has become interested in offering these residents an alternative credential. There are several approaches that could be considered for this goal, including adult diploma programs, GEDs, high school drop-out recovery programs, union apprenticeships, and alternative paths to post-secondary education, which help adults obtain credentials that are clearly linked in the research to earnings and career success. These all involve considerable public investment, time commitment, and skill building on the part of the job seeker. Work readiness certificates, on the other hand, appear to offer a low-cost, rapid turn-around credential that might provide a competitive edge in the job market.

For their part, employers of all sizes across industries and geographic boundaries are calling for individuals who are “work-ready.” Standards for what constitutes a “work-

ready” individual vary, but employers generally use this term to describe someone who possesses a baseline of hard skills (e.g., reading and math proficiency, computer literacy, using office equipment) and soft skills (e.g., customer service, problem solving, reliability, cultural competence, leadership, teamwork). In many cases, employers view this combination of skills as transferable from one position to another, across industries. In response to this call, work readiness certificates are intended to serve as signals to employers that a person has the basic skills needed to perform, at minimum, entry-level work across sectors.

Work readiness certificates come in many different forms, each with its own purposes, target populations, and competencies assessed. Some programs focus more on hard or soft skills, but the most prominent models incorporate both. Some target low-literate adults, who lack the kinds of credentials commonly accepted by employers as representative of a certain level of educational or professional preparation (e.g., high school or college diploma, steady work history, apprenticeship training). Others cover a range of people, from youth entering the job market to adults seeking to move up a career ladder. Some work readiness certificates are acquired by completing a training program that culminates in certification testing. Others can be acquired solely by passing a test that measures a specified set of employability competencies. In some cases, work readiness certification programs are managed by state agencies and conducted only in that state (e.g., WAGE Certificate Program), while others lead to credentials that are designed to be portable across state lines (e.g., National Work Readiness Credential).

This report summarizes five of the nation’s many work readiness certificates, which are representative of the diverse range of such initiatives in terms of target population, certification requirements, geography, and other factors:

WAGE Certificate Program: The Workforce Alliance for Growth in the Economy provides a job readiness program developed for the state of Arkansas. The state’s Department of Adult Education manages WAGE’s work-based program, which prepares individuals for acquiring employability, industrial, or clerical certificates. The program is open to people new to the labor market and to incumbent workers who assess above a 6.0 and below a 12.9 grade level equivalency on the Test of Basic Adult Education. Local advisory committees throughout Arkansas set their own requirements for WAGE’s employability certificate. To receive this certificate, participants must achieve specific levels on the TABE and the program’s own assessments, demonstrating their proficiency in a range of hard and soft skills tied to WAGE’s work readiness curriculum. Several states have studied Arkansas’s certification program in modeling their own workforce education programs.

Workforce Skills Certification System: CASAS (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System) offers the Workforce Skills Certification System (WSCS) for both incumbent workers and new entrants to the workforce. A Workforce Skills Certificate is linked to a high school skill level (ready to pass the GED). Industry groups, communities, and states can use the wide array of CASAS tools to create standardized workforce readiness credentials that document job seekers’ academic and soft skills. Workforce Skills Certificates are awarded to individuals who perform satisfactorily on two assessments: the standardized literacy tests for the Certification Assessment Battery and the work-based, portfolio project soft skills assessment, known as the Certification Assessment Portfolio.

Work Certified Program: Work Certified is a pre-employment basic and soft skills training course managed by Florida’s Workforce Development Board of the Treasure Coast. While it originated in Florida, the program has expanded to other states, including Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Texas. The program’s target population is individuals with at least a sixth-grade reading level who are seeking entry- to intermediate-level employment. Trainees who complete the curriculum and pass the final comprehensive exam receive “employee certification.”

WorkKeys Career Readiness Certification: A product of ACT, Inc., WorkKeys is a job skills assessment system that offers Career Readiness Certificates to individuals who achieve adequate scores on three tests of core work competencies. It has assessed individuals ranging

from those seeking entry-level employment to those who wish to advance into supervisory positions. Many licensed providers recommend that test takers have at least a ninth-grade education to perform well on WorkKeys. WorkKeys has been implemented for years in various states (e.g., Kentucky, Indiana, Louisiana); it is arguably the most widely recognized work readiness certification model in the country, and has been widely adopted by employers.

National Work Readiness Credential: The National Work Readiness Credential (WRC) is awarded to test takers who pass a computer-based assessment consisting of four modules that test for nine critical work readiness skills. The reading level of the assessment is estimated at fifth-grade equivalency. The WRC focuses exclusively on entry-level skills. It has been field tested in several states, including Rhode Island. Endorsed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, this credential has received widespread public attention and has often been com-

pared to WorkKeys with an expanded soft skills assessment. Employment-related outcomes are not available for this model, which has not been fully implemented. The National Work Readiness Council is the certifying body.

The report concludes with a brief discussion of the comparative attributes of the five certificates. This analysis highlights the benefits and costs associated with each, as well as issues that stakeholders should consider in determining which approaches would most benefit their state's unique demographics, economy, and political landscape.

WAGE Certificate Program

Summary	<p>The Arkansas Workforce Alliance for Growth in the Economy, a statewide workforce education program, provides a work-based certification program that trains job seekers and workers lacking basic skills in acquiring employability, industrial, or clerical certificates. Adult education programs in Arkansas can become WAGE-certified centers that deliver the program's work readiness curriculum and assessments.</p>
Certifying body	<p>Arkansas Adult Education manages WAGE's certificate program. WAGE is a state-certified, community-based, workforce development program whose mission is to improve the basic skills of Arkansas residents who are unemployed or underemployed. The alliance is a partnership among local employers, employment agencies, educators, industrial development organizations, and city government.</p>
Target population	<p>Individuals who assess above a 6.0 and below a 12.9 grade level equivalency on the TABE reading, math, and language subtests are eligible to participate. The target population includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Adults seeking pre-employment training (to enter or reenter the workforce) for entry-level jobs; and• Incumbent workers seeking to upgrade their employment-related skill levels.
Testing locations and sites	<p>Locations</p> <p>Certified WAGE centers are located <i>only</i> in various Arkansas counties. Each center has its own director/coordinator.</p> <p>Sites</p> <p>WAGE certified centers typically include adult education centers, community colleges, and One-Stop Centers. Instruction takes place at these sites and at worksites.</p>
Work readiness curriculum	<p>Students take the TABE to identify their skill level and determine their placement within the PLATO Web Learning Network. The network's capabilities for tracking and monitoring student progress make it particularly helpful to educators in customizing instruction and managing student information.</p> <p>Instruction takes place at local adult education programs or at the worksite. Lessons are contextualized for work settings and tailored to individual learning needs. Curricula for both pre-employment and incumbent worker training are designed to address the competencies identified through employer surveys and literacy task analyses conducted by WAGE-certified centers. WAGE staff members often collect materials from their business partners for instructors to use as "functional hooks." The PLATO Learning Network also delivers supplementary instruction to participants in desired skill areas.</p> <p>Students can attend class at WAGE center computer labs or can opt for distance learning to accommodate personal circumstances (e.g., work hours, transportation issues, child care needs). Distance learning has been a particularly convenient option for working adults attempting to balance PLATO Learning Network activities with family and job responsibilities.</p> <p>WAGE curriculum and certification standards are aligned with TABE standards.</p>
Competencies assessed, scoring process, and test format	<p>Competencies assessed</p> <p>The program assesses for 112 basic skills competencies, based on SCANS research and Arkansas employer feedback (provided through local WAGE Alliance advisory committees). WAGE advisory committees determine the skills required to obtain most entry-level jobs in the communities they represent. In Union County, for example, WAGE received feedback from employers that "performing whole number operations" and "using common knowledge for safety" are critical skills for entry-level work. Basic computer literacy is also an important component of the program.</p> <p>Scoring process</p> <p>Because the WAGE program utilizes various assessments, some are scored by computer, while others are manually scored by instructors.</p> <p>Test format</p> <p>WAGE students must complete several assessments to receive an employability certificate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• TABE, a multiple-choice exam available on line or in paper-and-pencil format;• WAGE test, a paper-and-pencil test of WAGE's 112 basic skills competencies (an electronic version is in development); and• The PC assessment, which is computer-based.

Certification process

Authorization of training/test administrators

An adult education program must complete the following steps to become a WAGE-certified center:

- Form an alliance of at least six local businesses;
- Visit other WAGE centers;
- Complete training in Literacy Task Analysis (LTA) and functional hooks;
- Conduct six LTAs on businesses in the community;
- Acquire Memoranda of Agreement from alliance members, stating that they will give added consideration to job and promotion candidates who are WAGE-certified, given that all other candidate qualifications are equal; permit adult educators to perform LTAs on critical entry-level jobs within their companies; and assist with providing instructional materials and classroom space when needed;
- Present start-up documentation for approval before the state WAGE advisory committee (the state WAGE coordinator serves on this committee).

Certified WAGE centers hold a voting position on the state WAGE advisory committee.

Certification for students

WAGE offers three kinds of certificates issued by the Arkansas Department of Workforce Education: employability, industrial, and clerical.

Employability certificate: Local WAGE advisory committees set their own local standards for employability certification depending on employer needs. Each committee, half of whose members are local business representatives, determines the competencies and grade-level equivalency standards required for the employability certificate. For example, following the policy set by its local advisory committee, the WAGE Program in Union County requires that students:

- Achieve 9.5 reading, math, and language arts levels on the TABE;
- Complete 15 hours of pre-employment training; and
- Score a minimum of 85 percent on PC skills, life and job skills, and pre-employment assessments.

One-Stop Center officials serving on this local committee refer job seekers in need of TABE testing and basic skills training to WAGE. They may also provide classroom space, support services, and job search and placement services.

Individuals who do not meet program requirements are encouraged to receive basic skills instruction through adult education services to advance them to the levels that qualify them for program participation.

Industrial certificate and clerical certificate: The program's industrial and clerical certificates have additional requirements set by WAGE's state advisory committee. To earn an industrial certificate, among other requirements, a student must score at least a 12.9 in reading, math, and language on the TABE and perform satisfactorily on several tests, including the state WAGE and computer literacy tests, and the WAGE-approved spatial and mechanical test. These certificates are recognized statewide.

Cost

The WAGE program is included in the Arkansas state budget for adult education. It is free to participants. Training to become a WAGE-certified center and certifying personnel to conduct literacy task analyses are provided by the state at no charge to local programs. In some areas, One-Stop Centers and community colleges provide in-kind support (e.g., classroom space), with businesses making occasional financial contributions.

In general, staff salaries are the main cost to adult education programs in becoming certified WAGE centers (e.g., salary for a center coordinator who conducts literacy task analyses and promotes the program). Additional costs can include computers and software (e.g., PLATO, Teknimedia for computer literacy, AZTEC, other software for teaching basic skills). The state pays for the LTA/functional hooks training, which is set up through the WAGE state coordinator's office at the Arkansas Department of Workforce Education.

**Employment-
related outcomes**

2004-2005 WAGE program outcomes include:

- 3,046 total students served;
- 944 entered the workforce while in WAGE (31 percent); 893 entered the workforce post-WAGE (29 percent);
- 128 were promoted or received a raise post-WAGE;
- 134 business partners, including El Dorado Chemical Company, Cooper Rubber and Tire, and Pacific MDF in Arkansas hired WAGE certificate holders.

In addition, the WAGE program at the One-Stop Center in Conway reported the following outcomes for WAGE program participants in 2003:

- For every 12 hours of work completed on PLATO, students advanced at least one grade level.
- 40 percent of students who completed a minimum of 12 hours of instruction earned a certificate.
- 82 students obtained certificates.
- 147 began employment during the program.
- 43 entered post-secondary institutions.

Some employers have provided incentives for WAGE participation or certification, including:

- Increase in hourly wages;
- Release time for classes; and
- Sign-on bonuses.

In addition, WAGE completion can be accepted as meeting a prerequisite for next-level workplace training.

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Workforce Skills Certification System

Summary	<p>The Workforce Skills Certification System, a product of the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System, measures student achievement in the areas of academic skills, occupational knowledge, and work experience, as well as in learning gains. WSCS provides a set of tools for states, communities, and industry groups to customize workforce readiness credentials that document both academic and soft skills.</p>
Certifying body	<p>CASAS, a California-based nonprofit, offers the Workforce Skills Certification System, the nation's most widely used system for assessing adult basic reading, math, listening, writing, and speaking skills in functional life and work skills contexts. CASAS is the only assessment system of its kind developed for both native and non-native English speakers and has been approved by the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Labor. The CASAS system integrates assessment, curriculum, instruction, and data reporting.</p>
Target population	<p>Target populations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Youth and adults, including those entering the workforce, transitioning to work, incumbent workers, and dislocated workers; and• Individuals who function at a high school skill level (ready to pass the GED). <p>CASAS offers assessments and instructional resources to help individuals who function below a high school skill level to advance to a level that qualifies them to receive a Workforce Skills Certificate. CASAS Skill Level Descriptors for ABE and ESL describe what individuals can do, starting at a pre-beginning/beginning literacy level (i.e., a person who can provide very basic personal identification in written form, such as on job applications, and who can handle routine entry-level jobs that require only basic written communication), up to an advanced secondary level. As students advance in proficiency levels, they can earn "Statements of Attainment" that benchmark their progress. These validate a student's competencies and pre-certification learning gains for employers and training providers.</p>
Testing locations and sites	<p>Locations</p> <p>WSCS pilot projects are operating in California (Sacramento-LEED), Connecticut (Department of Education grant initiative), Oregon (Portland-area Workforce Investment Board), and Washington (South Seattle Community College, Department of Workforce Development).</p> <p>Sites</p> <p>WSCS can be part of a statewide strategy or may be used by individual service providers trained by CASAS. The CASAS Workforce Skills Certificate is administered and awarded at a local, regional, or state level by organizations including chambers of commerce, business associations, workforce investment boards, and educational institutions (e.g., high schools, community colleges) or by programs such as VABE and VESL. Organizations may contract with CASAS to provide assessment scoring and issuing of certificates.</p>
Work readiness curriculum	<p>CASAS provides a framework that programs can use to build, modify, or enrich their own curricula for work readiness. Programs that administer WSCS create curricula tailored to learners' needs, based on WSCS Competencies (a subset of the CASAS competencies), learner assessment results (appraisal, pre-test), program goals, and industry content.</p> <p>CASAS Quick Search software provides curriculum support with an easy-to-use database of more than 2,000 commercially available print, audio, visual, and computer-related instructional materials appropriate for use with adults and youth. Users can locate and sort instructional resources based on CASAS competency, program area (e.g., ABE, ESL), skill level, publisher, or title.</p>

Competencies assessed, scoring process, and test format

Competencies assessed

Using employer-validated tools, WSCS measures and certifies the work readiness of individuals at levels identified by employers as necessary for entry-level employment and career advancement (equivalent to adult secondary level). WSCS is aligned with the CASAS competencies, SCANS, and O*NET (the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Information Network, a comprehensive database of job characteristics and worker attributes). Certification levels for each component were established through employer input and performance data from CASAS assessments administered to adults and youth.

WSCS includes two primary components:

- The **Certification Assessment Battery** measures skills in reading, math, problem solving, and critical thinking, with applied performance in the context of four industry groups: banking, construction, health, and high-tech/telecommunications. While the CAB assesses through questions written in these industry contexts, the student need not have experience in those fields to perform well on the assessment.
- The **Certification Assessment Portfolio** combines project-based learning and worksite performance ratings to measure a student's ability to integrate work readiness skills—team skills, customer service, project development and presentation—while developing and completing a work-based portfolio project.

CASAS offers an optional alternative soft skills assessment in partnership with Learning Resources, Inc. Using video-based simulations, the LRI Work Readiness System measures communication, problem solving, critical thinking, teamwork, and customer service skills. At the discretion of a local program, the LRI assessment can be used in lieu of the CAP (or as a standalone soft skills assessment) to certify individuals not enrolled in a portfolio-based/training program.

A WSCS basic technology assessment is under development.

Scoring process

CASAS Skill Level Descriptors define performance in employment and adult life skill contexts by providing descriptions of adults' general, job-related ability in reading, mathematics, oral communication, and writing. The WSCS reading and math assessments use the CASAS scale. Other WSCS components employ standardized scoring rubrics to measure learner performance of workplace and soft skills. Agencies may choose to score locally or contract with CASAS for scoring services.

Test format

WSCS incorporates a variety of testing formats, including multiple choice, written response, performance-based simulation, and project-based portfolio development.

Certification process

Authorization of WSCS administrators

All WSCS assessors must be trained by CASAS. Training may be offered in the customer's community, at the annual CASAS National Summer Institute in San Diego, California, or at CASAS.

Certification for students

To earn a Workforce Skills Certificate, a student must:

- Successfully complete the multiple assessments of the Certification Assessment Battery; and
- Achieve a Level 3 ("Proficient") on all of the competencies assessed through the Certification Assessment Portfolio.

Administration of the Certification Assessment Battery and the Certification Assessment Portfolio may take place at the culmination of a work-readiness program or as a standalone activity. If the assessment is administered as a standalone activity, the LRI Work Readiness System is used in lieu of the CAP. Agencies are encouraged to monitor learners' progress during the course of a program, using appropriate CASAS pre/post-tests, and to administer the Workforce Skills Certificate CAB when warranted by an individual's assessment results.

Cost	<p>Training required to implement WSCS:</p> <p>On-site training, for up to 25 people \$3,000</p> <p>or</p> <p>Training at CASAS National Summer Institute, held every June in San Diego, CA</p> <p>Certification Assessment Battery:</p> <p>Test Administration Manual \$75 (available for banking, construction, health, and high-tech/telecommunications)</p> <p>Reading and Math, per set of 25 (reusable) \$240 (used for all industry groups)</p> <p>Critical Thinking/Problem Solving, per set of 25 (consumable) \$115 (available for banking, construction, health, and high-tech/telecommunications)</p> <p>Applied Performance Assessment Forms, per pad of 50 \$5 (available for health and high-tech/telecommunications)</p> <p>Certification Assessment Portfolio:</p> <p>CAP Teacher's Guide \$75</p> <p>CAP Student's Guide, one per student \$20</p> <p>Worksite Performance Rating Package, per set of 25 \$50</p> <p>WSCS Answer Sheets, per set of 100 \$40</p> <p>Software:</p> <p>CASAS Quick Search CD and Manual \$55 (multi-user packs available)</p> <p>Optional additional costs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LRI Work Readiness System Soft Skills Assessment Fees available upon request; contact Learning Resources, Inc. • CASAS Appraisals and Pre/Post-Tests Fees available upon request (<i>Employability Competency System, Workforce Learning Systems</i>)
Employment-related outcomes	CASAS does not track employment-related outcomes. Agencies administer WSCS and evaluate outcomes locally.
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Work Certified Program

Summary	Work Certified is a pre-employment, basic and soft skills training program, leading to a certificate of work readiness ("employee certification").
Certifying body	Workforce Development Board of the Treasure Coast, Florida. Entities that purchase the Work Certified program are authorized by the Treasure Coast WDB to become certifying agents.
Target population	<p>Individuals seeking entry-level to intermediate-level employment including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Youth over age 15• Unemployed and underemployed individuals• Incumbent workers referred by employers for additional training• Workers changing industries• Individuals reentering the labor market• GED students• High school students and graduates• College students• Ex-offenders (participating in reentry programs)• Individuals with advanced ESOL level• TANF clients with a sixth- to eighth-grade reading level who are preparing for work <p>Treasure Coast highly recommends that program participants have at least a sixth-grade reading level to complete the curriculum in the stipulated timeframe.</p>
Testing locations and sites	<p>Locations</p> <p>The Work Certified program is used in Florida, Illinois, Michigan, Texas, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts (Greater New Bedford WIB).</p> <p>Training and testing sites</p> <p>The Work Certified program may be purchased by state agencies for system-wide implementation or by individual agencies as training/testing sites. Those that purchase the program become certifying agents who administer the program locally; they select staff to be trained as instructors and trainers to train their customers. Training is conducted by these "Work Certified specialists" at sites including businesses, One-Stop Centers, community colleges, public high schools, and community organizations. Sites must be able to provide at least three days per week of access to computer labs for training. Juvenile justice programs, housing authority programs, training, and trade organizations use the program, among others.</p>

Work readiness curriculum

The program provides a 90-hour curriculum (generally covered in 3 weeks of training) in 9 modules, which can also be taught separately:

- Reading Comprehension (9 hours)
- Business Tools (computers plus, 12 hours)
- Pre-employment (6 hours)
- Customer Service (12 hours)
- Business Writing (9 hours)
- Job Skills I (work maturity, 12 hours)
- Job Skills II (employability and advanced work maturity, 2 hours)
- Business Math (12 hours)
- General Business Knowledge (6 hours)

Waiver exams are available for 5 of the 9 modules but are not recommended. The Customer Service, Job Skills I, Job Skills II, and General Business Knowledge modules are required of all participants. The curriculum is being translated into Spanish and pilot program outcomes will determine whether Work Certified will also administer the final certification exam—the “comprehensive exam”—in Spanish.

In addition to teaching basic and soft skills, Work Certified teaches participants about their roles in the workplace. Participants acquire team-building, leadership, and self-esteem-building skills through their interactions with classmates and trainers. Trainers employ a variety of teaching methods and tools (e.g., role-playing, case studies, worksheets). Businesses provide many of the examples and exercises used in Work Certified’s curriculum.

Work Certified recommends a two-hour student orientation at least one week prior to the first class to: present a program overview and participation guidelines; make logistical arrangements, including transportation and child care for students; and conduct pre-assessment tests (in reading comprehension, business writing, and business math).

The Workforce Development Board of the Treasure Coast requires its participants to meet certain criteria (e.g., seeking employment, enrolled in a GED course or have a high school diploma/equivalency, attending an orientation to take the pre-assessment tests in reading, math and business writing). Other regions may set additional requirements for admitting students.

Competencies assessed, scoring process, and test format

Competencies assessed

The program is based on fifty competencies that are presented as the knowledge, skills, and behaviors needed to attain and succeed in the average entry-level job. This includes five “universal competencies” in attendance, timeliness, “proper grooming,” interpersonal skills with teachers, and interpersonal skills with classmates.

Florida Atlantic University validated the program’s exam questions. The National Skills Standards Board helped to guide program development and implementation, including competency standards.

Scoring process

Test takers must score at least 80 percent on the 75-question final comprehensive exam. The computer immediately scores the online exam and tracks how the student performed in each module. Pen-and-paper exams, scored by proctors, can also be used. Turnaround time for manual scoring is generally a few days.

Test format

The final comprehensive exam contains 75 multiple-choice questions and has no time limit. Work Certified utilizes online testing, although pen-and-paper tests are available if needed. Certified proctors, not training instructors, administer the final exam. Sites select a staff member, such as a receptionist or a case manager, to serve as proctor.

By the end of 2006, Work Certified will launch a Web site through which students will be able to take pre-assessments and module quizzes on line.

In addition to serving as a testing mechanism, the Learning Management System created by Dynamic Works Institute will facilitate program management and staff operations by allowing students to register on line and by tracking student transcripts and progress.

Certification process

Work Certified requires instructors and trainers to be certified in order to administer the certification to job seekers.

Authorization of training/test administrators

- **Instructor certification:** The Treasure Coast WDB trains individuals referred by employers and other agencies to become certified program trainers. They must take a 30-hour course that reviews all 9 modules and score a minimum of 90 percent on the instructor certification test. Instructors maintain their certification only if they attend an annual meeting to review program changes and pass an annual test with a minimum score of 90 percent.
- **Trainer certification:** Trainers of instructors must be certified. The process for becoming a certified trainer includes having instructor certification; passing a process test; experience teaching the program at least twice; and attending train-the-trainer sessions.

Certification for students

- **Employee certification:** To qualify to take the final comprehensive exam, students must demonstrate mastery of 50 competencies by completing class assignments and activities and passing all module quizzes with a minimum 80 percent score during 105 training hours (90 hours of onsite training, plus 15 hours of outside assignments). Once these requirements are met, a person must dress professionally to take the final comprehensive exam, pass it with a minimum score of 80 percent, and complete a program evaluation. Students may take the final exam up to three times to qualify for certification.

Treasure Coast recommends the following procedure for retaking the final exam:

Fail on first attempt—Instructors should provide refresher instruction, focusing on areas of weakness.

Fail on second attempt—Students may take the exam a third time, but it is strongly recommended that they retake the training instead. This recommendation is based on instructor feedback and program outcomes that demonstrate that 90 percent of students who fail a second time fail again on the third attempt.

Fail on third attempt—Students must retake the training.

The Work Certified Program reports that students who do not become certified, but apply the skills they learned through the program, still succeed in the workplace. In follow-up success stories, a few of these students have been employed and moved up career ladders to become first-line supervisors.

Work Certified's standard credential comes in the form of a wallet-sized card. The front of the card displays Work Certified's logo and the certified individual's name, while the reverse side lists the nine training modules completed by the card holder, the certifying agent's logo and telephone number, and Work Certified's Web address. The back can be customized to also carry the logo and phone number of the local certifying agent. When the Learning Management System is in place, students who receive certification will be able to print their module certificates from a computer.

Those who do not earn cards but complete the program receive a "certificate of completion" for each module they pass.

With the exception of certification requirements, Work Certified allows for significant flexibility in how the program is administered locally. Treasure Coast signs memoranda of understanding with program partners (e.g., One-Stop Centers) to help certified individuals find jobs and to track their success in the workplace. One-Stop staff then reports these results to the WDB to validate performance.

While it is not mandated, local certifying agents generally report program outcomes (e.g., employment and retention rates of program graduates) to the Treasure Coast WDB. When the Learning Management System is in place, it will track Work Certified program enrollment, completion, and certification data.

Cost

The WDB of the Treasure Coast authorizes WIBs and other organizations to become certifying agents who provide Work Certified instruction and testing. In most cases, the program is offered cost-free to students. (In some instances, certifying agents charge for their services.)

Local certifying agents may purchase one of the following three kinds of membership. Membership status may be changed on each anniversary date.

Basic Membership fee: \$5,000 for one year

- Limited Help Desk/Technical Assistance by e-mail or telephone for three months; limited to six sessions (includes advice, planning assistance, direction, questions and answers); response time immediate to five business days
- One program audit during training for implementation year only; no audit included in subsequent years
- Reports on certification tests completed and results
- Updates to curriculum or program
- Use of the national logo

Bronze Membership fee: \$10,000 for one year

- Limited Help Desk/Technical Assistance by e-mail or telephone for six months; limited to twelve sessions (includes advice, planning assistance, direction, questions and answers); response time immediate to five business days
- One program audit annually, during teacher training in the initial year and through video in subsequent years
- Reports on certification tests completed and results
- Updates to curriculum or program
- Use of the national logo

Gold Membership fee: \$15,000 for one year

- Unlimited Help Desk/Technical Assistance by e-mail or telephone for one year; sessions include advice, planning assistance, direction, questions and answers; response time immediate to five business days
- One on-site technical assistance visit (travel costs to be reimbursed)
- One program audit annually, during teacher training in the initial year and through video in subsequent years
- Direct access through the Internet to reports on certification tests completed and results
- Updates to curriculum or program
- Use of the national logo
- Board listed on the Work Certified website as a "Gold" site

The following optional programs and resources are also offered:

- Overview presentations to board and One-Stop staff: \$750 plus travel (special arrangements can be made for multiple presentations)
- Northstar Workbook Transparencies
- Marketing programs that include buttons for One-Stop staff

Employment-related outcomes

The Work Certified Program reports that as of 2006:

- It has trained and certified over 3,000 students throughout the United States. Roughly 83 percent of these students passed the certification exam.
 - 92 percent of its graduates find jobs within 30 days after graduation.
 - 86 percent are still employed after 6 months.
 - 32 percent of program graduates have been promoted.
 - More than 50 businesses (including banking, manufacturing, boating, food, aircraft, furniture, plastics, architecture, universities, and printing companies) have endorsed the program, some of whom offer higher starting wages to program graduates.
-

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WorkKeys Career Readiness Certification

Summary

WorkKeys is a job skills assessment system that offers paper-and-pencil and computerized tests of selected work competencies required to earn its Career Readiness Certificate.

Certifying body

ACT, Inc., a nonprofit, provides more than a hundred assessment, research, information, and program management services in the broad areas of education and workforce development. The organization is well known for its college entrance exam.

Used in many states, WorkKeys is ACT's job skills assessment system. It offers three main kinds of services:

- **Workplace skills assessments**, *three of which are the basis for career readiness certification*. ACT authorizes sites to become licensed providers of WorkKeys assessments for a fee.
- **Job analysis services**, *including two types of profiling services to employers*. WorkKeys authorizes *job profiling* of specific jobs at specific companies. This process identifies the competencies and WorkKeys skills levels deemed necessary for an individual to perform successfully in a specific job. Companies using WorkKeys for hiring decisions complete a profile of specific jobs to comply with employment law. They have the legal right to request that job seekers achieve certain WorkKeys scores before receiving a job application. Those who do not profile specific jobs can require certification (just as they can require drug testing and interviews), but they cannot mandate specific scores before providing a job seeker with a job application.

WorkKeys' Work Readiness Profile is based on a review of nearly 13,000 profiled jobs nationwide. WorkKeys also compiles *occupational profiles* that represent the average skill level required for entry into an occupation (as opposed to qualifications for a specific job). ACT has compiled more than 1,200 occupational profiles from its database of individual job profiles. These profiles can be used for career counseling and as one of several components in an employer's hiring process (in compliance with the EEOC).

- **Workforce training resources**, *offered through hundreds of WorkKeys partner sites and over 200 ACT Centers nationwide*.

Target population

The target population for the Career Readiness Certificate is a broad range of people, such as:

- High school students; and
- Adults seeking employment or currently employed.

The Career Readiness Certificate is presented as a credential that confirms to employers that an individual possesses the basic workplace skills required for "common jobs." However, WorkKeys has assessed and been utilized by individuals ranging from those seeking entry-level employment to those wishing to advance into supervisory positions. Companies can use WorkKeys for hiring, training development (to identify skill gaps and provide appropriate training), or promotions decisions.

ACT reports that WorkKeys assessments are accessible to individuals with low- through college-level literacy, although many licensed providers recommend that test takers have at least a ninth-grade level of education to perform well.

Testing locations and sites

Locations

As of May 2006, Career Readiness Certificates were deployed in 11 states: Indiana (20,000+ certificates awarded); Louisiana (9,000+ certificates); Virginia (5,000+ certificates); Kentucky (5,000+ certificates); Oklahoma (600+ certificates); Missouri; North Carolina; Alabama; Tennessee; New Mexico; and South Carolina. Implementation of the CRC is in progress in several other states, including Washington, Nevada, West Virginia, Iowa, Kansas, Ohio, Colorado, Georgia, and Arizona. Several states (California, New York, Vermont, Florida) and Washington, DC, have expressed interest in implementing it.

Sites

The right to become a licensed provider of WorkKeys assessments may be purchased from ACT by states for system-wide implementation or by individual organizations, such as workforce development providers and educational institutions. Tests for the CRC may be taken at hundreds of WorkKeys partner sites, including One-Stop Centers, adult education facilities, community colleges, and technical centers. They may also be taken at the 200+ ACT centers throughout the United States.

Competencies assessed, scoring process, and test format

Competencies assessed

The Career Readiness Certificate is based on three assessments, each with its own skill ranges measured by WorkKeys:

- Reading for Information (WorkKeys assesses at skill levels 3-7)
- Applied Mathematics (assesses at skill levels 3-7)
- Locating Information (assesses at skill levels 3-6)

While employers/organizations most commonly use Reading for Information, Applied Mathematics, and Locating Information, they can also opt to use six other kinds of WorkKeys assessments:

- Applied Technology (assesses at skill levels 3-6)
- Writing (1-5)
- Business Writing (1-5)
- Teamwork (3-6)
- Observation (3-6)
- Listening (1-5)

WorkKeys assessments cover foundational workplace skills based on the SCANS (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills) competencies of the U.S. Department of Labor.

ACT also offers a Readiness assessment for low literacy populations to assess the appropriateness of using the WorkKeys assessments. The WorkKeys Readiness assessment is a self-scored screening instrument for the two most often used WorkKeys assessments: Applied Mathematics and Reading for Information. Because most WorkKeys tests require basic reading skills, it can be used as a screening tool to help determine whether examinees are ready to take WorkKeys tests or should be advised to pursue further training first.

Scoring process

There are nine skill levels for each WorkKeys workplace skill (1 being the lowest skill level, and 9 the highest). WorkKeys measures performance only within the range that employers stipulate for each assessed skill. For example, examinees taking the Applied Mathematics assessment are assessed only for skill levels 3-7, the range of math skill levels needed for 85 percent of all jobs. Likewise, WorkKeys assesses examinees for skill levels 3-6 in Locating Information, the locating information skills needed for 85 percent of all jobs. Examinees are scored on this numerical scale by computer or by licensed centers that use paper-and-pencil tests.

Test format

Testing is modular. Each assessment has its own time limit (range from 30 to 60 minutes). All assessments are available in paper-and-pencil format, although the Reading for Information, Applied Mathematics, Locating Information, Business Writing, and Applied Technology assessments may also be taken on computer. Audio or video is used to conduct the writing, teamwork, observation, and listening assessments. Reading for Information, Applied Mathematics, Applied Technology, and Locating Information assessments are also available in Spanish.

Certification process

Authorization of test administrators

Educational institutions, One-Stop Centers, businesses, and other organizations may purchase the right to become licensed providers of WorkKeys assessments.

ACT advises that states or others interested in implementing WorkKeys contact a representative to learn more about how to become a licensed provider. Because there are many options for implementation, a WorkKeys representative visits interested states and organizations, free of charge, to present the options that would best fit their unique needs.

Certification for test takers

The CRC is based on three WorkKeys assessments: Applied Mathematics, Locating Information, and Reading for Information. It is awarded at three levels: Gold, Silver, and Bronze. Most participating states have adopted this three-tiered credential system.

A **Gold certificate** demonstrates that a person has the skills required for 90 percent of the jobs profiled in the WorkKeys national database and represents a Level 5 on the WorkKeys scale for Reading for Information, Locating Information, and Applied Mathematics.

A **Silver certificate** demonstrates that a person has the skills required for 65 percent of the jobs profiled in the WorkKeys national database and represents a Level 4 on the WorkKeys scale for Reading for Information, Locating Information, and Applied Mathematics.

A **Bronze certificate** demonstrates that a person has the skills required for 30 percent of jobs profiled in the WorkKeys national database and represents a Level 3 on the WorkKeys scale for Reading for Information, Locating Information, and Applied Mathematics.

WorkKeys' paper certificates indicate an individual's level of achievement, assessment scores, and other text or graphics (e.g., seals), as determined by the licensed administrator. On the reverse side of the certificate, WorkKeys provides information on its national workforce development system; what its scores mean and what skill proficiencies they represent; and which organizations endorse the certification.

Most participating states, such as Virginia and North Carolina, refer to the WorkKeys certificate as the Career Readiness Certificate, but a few have their own certification names and/or levels including:

- Kentucky Employability Certificate: Gold and Silver levels
- Louisiana's Work-Ready! Certificate: Gold, Silver, and Bronze levels
- Indiana WorkKeys Certificate: Gold and Blue levels

Those who do not meet the requirements for earning a certificate are referred to remedial training providers with the tools to help address skills gaps identified by WorkKeys assessments. WorkKeys sells "Targets for Instruction," manuals designed to help educators and trainers develop curricula and instructional strategies for the WorkKeys skills areas. In addition, ACT endorses two publishers whose instructional materials meet ACT's standards for WorkKeys training curricula: Worldwide Interactive Network and KeyTrain. Clients may purchase licenses to use the WorkKeys curriculum of these vendors.

Worldwide Interactive Network's WorkKeys curriculum identifies skill gaps and guides training decisions to improve WorkKeys scores and upgrade skill levels. Career Solutions, WIN's workplace literacy curriculum, covers the nine skills and proficiency areas encompassed by WorkKeys tests. Career Solutions consists of 53 competency-based courses that target critical career and life skills. It includes five levels of Career Readiness/Work Habits that address such soft skills as self-management, cooperation and respect, and interpersonal interaction. The interactive curriculum provides courseware in print, CD-ROM, or online format, and can be used in classrooms or for distance learning.

KeyTrain was designed specifically for WorkKeys. It includes targeted, self-paced instruction, pre- and post-assessments, a complete learning management system, and a job profiles database. KeyTrain offers over 20,000 pages of lessons and a natural-voice soundtrack reads instructional material. The learning management system allows staff to track learner progress and print reports. KeyTrain is available on CD-ROM, in print, and over the Internet. KeyTrain Beginning Skills addresses lower skills (pre-WorkKeys), including a diagnostic tool for an extensive set of curricula. It is available in Spanish.

Cost	<p>The WorkKeys system is priced at one rate for government and educators, and at another rate for employers. WorkKeys representatives make presentations to states, educators, and employers about implementation options and their respective costs.</p> <p>ACT estimates that the cost of implementing a WorkKeys CRC for Rhode Island would include a fee of \$12 per person assessed (\$4 for each of the assessments in Reading for Information, Applied Mathematics, and Locating Information) and a one-time licensing fee of \$100 to each provider site to score computer-based tests. KeyTrain and Worldwide Interactive Network have separate licensing fees for WorkKeys instructional materials.</p> <p>Additional costs vary by state, which may set their own fee structures for CRC delivery. Some states charge \$45 per person assessed (e.g., to community colleges) to cover assessment fees, licensing fees, and overhead. Some states assume the cost of the test for selected employers and job seekers through state Adult Education funds or other grants. In Virginia, WIA funds are used through the One Stops. Indiana requires all One Stops to administer WorkKeys to WIA One-Stop participants and funds it through Reed Act funds. Michigan and Illinois administer WorkKeys reading and mathematics assessments to all eleventh-graders. Beginning in 2007-08, tenth to twelfth graders in Kentucky who plan to enter the workforce directly after high school can choose to take WorkKeys assessments. The Kentucky Department of Education will pay for their initial testing fees, and certificates will be issued in collaboration with the Department of Workforce Development. WorkKeys scores will be recorded on students' transcripts.</p>
Employment-related outcomes	<p>WorkKeys showcases its success stories in a "Case Studies" section of its Web site (www.act.org/workkeys/case/index.html). These case studies report outcomes for individual states, including: helping employers to find and retain qualified workers and to pinpoint employee skills; assisting individuals in achieving their career goals; building community partnerships; and helping schools to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind legislation.</p>
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National Work Readiness Credential

Summary

The National Work Readiness Credential (WRC) will be awarded to test takers who pass a computer-based assessment of nine critical work readiness skills organized into four modules. The assessment focuses exclusively on entry-level skills. The credential is being designed to be a national, portable certification of work readiness. Its full launch will begin in January 2007.

Certifying body

The National Work Readiness Council is a nonprofit formed by the credential's development partners—the District of Columbia, the states of Florida, New Jersey, New York, Washington, and Rhode Island, and JA Worldwide (merger of Junior Achievement Inc. and Junior International). The council will oversee and manage the certification process. The Institute for a Competitive Workforce of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce supports the development of the credential and markets it to employers.

Target population

The National Work Readiness Credential was designed for:

- Job seekers with relatively low literacy (reading level of the exam is estimated at fifth-grade equivalency) and numeracy skills. Candidates for the credential include both native and non-native English speakers.
- Individuals who want to signal to employers that they have the skills needed for the average entry-level job, defined by the National Work Readiness Council as a non-supervisory, non-professional position for which one does not need technical training beyond on-the-job training. The credential is most appropriate for individuals entering the workforce for the first time, those returning to the workforce after some time away, and those transitioning from one industry to another.

Testing locations and sites

Locations

Certification will be available in Florida, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Washington State, and Washington, DC. It has been field tested in each of these locations, as well as in Los Angeles and San Francisco, California; Louisville, Kentucky; Cleveland, Ohio; and Midland, Texas.

There will be a “soft” launch of the National Work Readiness Credential in approximately 50 sites around the nation, during which it is estimated that 10,000 individuals will take the assessment. As of August 2006, the National Work Readiness Council accepted applications from businesses and organizations interested in participating in this launch. In December 2006, the council will accept site applications for the credential's full launch, scheduled for January 2007. Soft launch sites will not need to reapply for the full launch.

For more information on becoming an assessment site for the credential and an online application, go to: www.castleworldwide.com/nwrc/asp/nwrc_site_application.asp.

Sites

Individual businesses, organizations, and states can deliver National Work Readiness Credential assessments.

Initially, the credential will be administered through the One-Stop Centers in the founding states and Washington, DC. Since assessments will be available through a Web-based delivery system via a secure server, assessment sites can include businesses, community colleges, One-Stop Centers, adult learning centers, community-based organizations, workforce training centers, union-sponsored programs, testing centers, junior achievement offices, and high schools.

Competencies assessed, scoring process, and test format	<p>Competencies assessed</p> <p>The National Work Readiness Credential bases its competencies on the nationally validated Equipped for the Future applied learning standards. The certification assessment consists of four modules that assess for nine skills considered critical to successfully completing entry-level tasks and responsibilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Situational judgment (cooperate with others, resolve conflicts and negotiate, observe critically, solve problems and make decisions, and take responsibility for learning) (60-minute time limit)• Reading with understanding (45-minute time limit)• Using math to solve problems (45-minute time limit)• Oral language (listen actively and speak so others can understand) (30-minute time limit) <p>Scoring process</p> <p>Scoring for the credential is not numerical. Those assessed either pass or not, indicating whether an individual is “work ready” or “needs more skill development to be work ready.” To be deemed “work ready” and receive the credential, one must pass all four modules.</p> <p>Test format</p> <p>The assessment is computer-based. Candidates are allotted a total of three hours to complete all four modules. The modules may be completed separately or all together, but all four assessment modules must be taken for the first time within a thirty-day period. Candidates have up to one year to pass all four modules and receive the certificate. The assessment has a multiple-choice format, with the exception of the Oral Language Test, which uses technology to provide a valid surrogate for a face-to-face oral proficiency interview. The OLT tests for English-language speaking and listening skills. Trained evaluators score recorded responses to assess competency in the skills “listen actively” and “speak so others can understand.”</p> <p>In June 2006, the National Work Readiness Council contracted with CASTLE Worldwide, one of the country’s leading certification and licensure companies, to deliver the assessments through its secure, web-based system.</p>
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**Certification
process**

Authorization of test administrators

Businesses or organizations may apply online to become an assessment site for the National Work Readiness Credential. The National Work Readiness Council reserves the right to approve all sites for assessment delivery.

To become certified, a site must:

- Provide delivery of the assessment in an environment conducive to testing, such as a training facility, conference room, or other area dedicated to this purpose, with appropriate equipment
- Be able to meet all technical requirements (hardware, software, connectivity)
- Be able to meet all other physical site requirements
- Be handicap accessible, with appropriate restroom facilities and a water fountain. Sites must also be able to provide accommodations to individuals with disabilities.
- Train at least two individuals to serve as proctors. (There must be one proctor per exam room for up to twelve candidates. If there are more than twelve candidates per room, an additional proctor is required for each group of twelve test takers. Proctors must be at least 18 years old and trained by CASTLE Worldwide.)
- Submit a \$300 certification fee, plus \$25 per proctor trained. Each site will be billed upon acceptance of the site application, completed trial run, and completed proctor training. Sites must be recertified if they change their delivery system, have hardware or software changes, fail to meet quality performance criteria, or if there are five or more reports of complaints from test takers within a six-month period. There is a \$300 recertification fee.

Certification for test takers

Candidates receive their results no later than three weeks after completing the fourth test. Those who pass all four modules of the assessment (“work ready”) within one year will be awarded the credential.

Individuals who do not pass one or more of the modules receive a diagnostic report identifying areas in need of improvement and are referred to an appropriate education and training provider for skill development. Workforce preparation programs may use *Getting Ready for the Work Readiness Credential* for guidance on the skills and knowledge necessary to meet the standard for work readiness defined by the WRC. This guide:

- Explains the National Work Readiness Credential Profile;
- Describes the Equipped for the Future skills, with a focus on how the skills are linked to entry-level tasks, and to a specific level of performance associated with those tasks;
- Provides specific steps to help job seekers improve their proficiency in relevant EFF skills linked to entry-level tasks; and
- Provides links to curriculum and teaching materials.

There is no limit to the number of times an individual may retake the assessment, although there is an additional charge for each retake. Retakes of the same assessment component have a minimum 25-day waiting period to allow for receipt of scores and further candidate preparation.

Cost	<p>The following are the costs of implementing the National Work Readiness Credential:</p> <p>Per Candidate Credentialing/Testing Fees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All four assessment components (first-time and retake candidates): \$65 • Oral Language assessment (per retake): \$25 • Situational Judgment assessment (per retake): \$15 • Math assessment (per retake): \$15 • Reading assessment (per retake): \$15 <p>States interested in purchasing a license to deliver a large number of WRC assessments should contact the executive director of the National Work Readiness Council to negotiate a discounted price.</p> <p>Site Certification Fees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certification fee per site (e.g., One-Stop Center, adult learning center): \$300 • Training fee per exam proctor: \$25 <p>States may employ different strategies for funding the credential. They may elect to cover all the costs of the assessments or site certification. They may also decide to fund education and training programs to prepare test takers or to fund evaluation. In New York, for example, the state Department of Labor has agreed to purchase a license to cover the fee for all test takers.</p>
Employment-related outcomes	<p>The purpose of the National Work Readiness Credential is to help business by reducing the costs of hiring, training, and turnover. Because the credential has not yet been implemented, there are no outcomes to report.</p>
Contact information	<p>Louis Soares, Executive Director National Work Readiness Council Phone: (202) 463-5525 Fax: (202) 887-3424</p> <p>Dale Coachman, Program Coordinator Institute for a Competitive Workforce U.S. Chamber of Commerce Phone: (202) 463-5581 E-mail: dcoachman@uschamber.com www.workreadiness.com</p>

Discussion

Rhode Island has joined the ranks of states seeking to improve employment outcomes for low-skilled adults by certifying that they possess the basic skills sought by employers in entry-level jobs. The large number of job readiness curricula and certificates adopted by states, WIBs, and others in the last decade bear witness to the difficulty of coming to a common understanding of precisely what skills—at what skill levels—will make a difference to employers in their hiring decisions and to job seekers in the quality of jobs they obtain.

A number of credentials are already in wide use in Rhode Island, as elsewhere. These include:

- *Occupational licenses issued by states or professional accreditation boards, for jobs such as nursing, teaching, cosmetology, and barbering.* Rhode Island licenses approximately 150 occupations, from accountants to professional wrestlers. Individuals must have a license to be employed in licensed occupations.
- *Professional skill certificates issued by professional associations, such as the Automotive Service Excellence certificates awarded based on experience and standardized tests results.* Employers generally pay a premium in the form of bonuses or higher wages for workers with these certificates.
- *Union apprenticeship programs,* most often in construction, transportation, and manufacturing.
- *Academic credentials,* including high school diplomas, GEDs, and college degrees. On average, incomes increase as the level of academic credential increases.

States are looking at work readiness certificates because all of the widely recognized credentials in that list are either are out of reach for the very low-skilled residents served by state-funded programs or no longer offer a competitive edge in the labor market for the unemployed. This is particularly true for the high school diploma and GED. While it is true that people with these diplomas earn more than do high school dropouts, incomes for individuals in all three educational categories are falling further behind incomes for individuals with college credentials.

Evidence is very thin that work readiness certificates make a difference to job seekers in terms of the length of their job search, the wages they are offered, or their retention on the job. Without this kind of evidence, it is diffi-

cult to argue that these certificates can give job seekers without a high school or equivalent degree any advantage in the job market. By the same token, Jobs for the Future's research has found little to indicate that employers deem most work readiness certificates to be important aids in the hiring process.

Nevertheless, Jobs for the Future's scan of the five work readiness certificates in this report has found that they represent a tool to help set uniform program standards. At minimum, they have helped to develop a common vocabulary for the kinds of qualifications that employers consider integral to entry-level work. If they can leverage the support of a wide range of stakeholders invested in Rhode Island's workforce development system, work readiness certificates may also have the potential to improve the employment outcomes of Rhode Island's low-income, unemployed, and underemployed residents.

A number of criteria should guide states, workforce boards, and others that are considering a work readiness certificate:

- Does the certificate offer a meaningful guide to matching applicant skills to the entry-level requirements of the local labor market?
- Do employers value the certificate?
- Will state sponsorship add value to the workforce system?
- Is the cost worth the benefit?

Matching Skills to Labor Market Requirements

As with much of the country, the Rhode Island economy is undergoing structural changes. The service economy, with jobs in health care, retail trade, financial services, and tourism/hospitality, is supplanting manufacturing and production jobs. With this shift comes an increase in the educational requirements for well-paying jobs, defined as jobs that pay at least 150 percent of the state's minimum wage.

As mentioned, employers tend to use the high school diploma as a proxy for the literacy and "soft skills" (e.g., attendance, interpersonal skills, ability to learn) that they are seeking in entry-level jobs. In order to better satisfy employer needs, all of the work readiness certificates reviewed here are based on extensive research on identifying employers' expectations for entry-level workers.

However, researchers associated with these various credentials have come to different conclusions about the level of skill needed for success in the entry-level workforce (see Table 1).

Both Work Certified and the National Work Readiness Credential are designed to provide access to a certificate for individuals with relatively low literacy levels but who can demonstrate mastery of the soft skills that employers generally associate with “someone willing to work.” A significant number of high-vacancy-rate jobs identified in Rhode Island’s 2005 Job Vacancy Survey, including home health aides, hotel housekeepers, and security guards, fall into this category. However, median wages for these jobs tend to be less than 150 percent of the state’s minimum wage.

All three remaining certificates require high school level literacy skills. Better paying jobs, such as customer service representatives or clerical positions, or jobs for which the employer provides on-the-job-training, tend to require higher literacy skills. A certificate with high school level literacy cut offs may prove more attractive to a larger number of employers, but it will exclude a significant number of entry-level job seekers. Should a statewide certification process become widely accepted, these job seekers might be put at an even greater disadvantage in the job market than they currently experience.

Offering documentation of soft skills may be an asset in the entry-level job market for low-skilled job seekers. The 2005 Skills Gap Report—*A Survey of the American Manufacturing Workforce* from the National Association of Manufacturers and Deloitte Consulting, LLP—illustrates employers’ increasing emphasis on soft skills as integral to workplace success, mostly anecdotal even in a sector traditionally known for its hard skills require-

ments. When asked which types of skills their employees would need more of over the next three years, 53 percent of the survey’s respondents selected “strong basic employability skills” (e.g., attendance, timeliness, work ethic), tied with “technical skills” at number one. And while 51 percent selected “reading/writing/communications,” a close 47 percent ranked “ability to work in a team” third on the list (Eisen, Jasinowski, and Kleinert 2005).

However, the idea that a test can measure soft skills reliably is widely debated. In addition, many employers have pointed to the difference between being able to identify the “correct” answer on a test and practicing a particular behavior (e.g., timeliness) on the job.

Of the five certificates reviewed in this report, all provide some measure of soft skills. WorkKeys provides the least thorough soft skills assessment and does not focus on such topics as attendance or work ethic. The National Work Readiness Credential proposes the most extensive soft skills assessment on conflict resolution, personal responsibility, and problem solving. The Workforce Skills Certification System requires a multi-person critique of a portfolio presentation of work readiness skills—a thorough but time-consuming process that could be difficult to administer on a large scale. Work Certified offers a Q&A test of soft skills, including such topics as attendance, personal grooming, and interpersonal skills, geared to a customized job readiness curriculum that applicants must complete. WAGE offers a paper-and-pencil test of “life and job skills,” also geared to its job readiness curriculum.

Table 1. Comparison of Selected Certificate Success Criteria

	WAGE	WSCS	Work Certified	WorkKeys	WRC
Literacy	Varies by county (Grade 9.5 in Union County, Arkansas)	High school	Grade 6-8	Grade 9 (according to feedback from licensed providers)	Grade 5
Soft skills	SCANS	portfolio	National Skills Standards Board	Teamwork, Observation, Listening	Situational Judgment
Computer literacy	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Other			General Business	Locating Information	Oral Language

Table 2. Comparison of Selected Certificate Outcome Data

	WAGE	WSCS	Work Certified	WorkKeys	WRC
Job Placement	60%	NA	92%	NA	NA
Placement Wage	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Job Retention	NA	NA	86%	NA	NA
Promotions	7%	NA	32%	NA	NA

NA = Not available

Customer Value Estimate

In choosing a particular work readiness certificate, Rhode Island should be guided by its perceived value to two primary customers (employers and job seekers):

- Is the presence or absence of a certificate likely to influence the hiring decisions of employers with good jobs?
- Are workers who have achieved a certificate likely to feature it in their job search process?

Unfortunately, statistically significant data on these questions are hard to come by. Moreover, the value that employers and certified individuals themselves ascribe to work readiness credentials (i.e., their “currency”) depends largely on the employment opportunities that such credentials can create. From our review, we have seen little to indicate that work readiness certificates provide an appreciable edge in the labor market.

One way to assess whether employers place a real value on work readiness certificates is to see whether they affect hiring decisions, as measured by hiring preferences, sign-on bonuses, or higher starting pay rates. Another measure of the value to employers of a work readiness certificate is if certificate holders perform better in the workplace, as measured by longer-term outcomes, such as job retention and advancement for job seekers. Programs that can prove that their certificates have not only resulted in job placement but also in job retention can make a good case that they can deliver a compelling return on investment.

Only some certificates track or make public their outcome data. The National Work Readiness Credential is still in the pilot implementation stage and does not yet have outcomes to report. CASAS does not track job outcomes for the Workforce Skills Certification System, and the available data on WorkKeys is mostly anecdotal. Self-reported data from two certificate programs linked to job

readiness curricula show some effect on placement and retention (see Table 2). However, it is difficult to draw conclusions without data from control or comparison groups.

Proponents of work readiness certification highlight that their programs were developed with employer feedback or participation. For any certification program, it is possible to find at least one employer who reports benefiting from work readiness training and certificates. For example:

WorkKeys

- **Reduced turnover:** In a six-month period in 2004, 73 employees left Bradner Village, a health care center and retirement community in Indiana. In the same six-month period in 2005, after WorkKeys was implemented, 46 staff members left. Turnover reduced by 37 percent.
- A 96 percent **training cost reduction** because WorkKeys has helped Bradner to identify candidates likely to succeed in the CNA training.
- **Time savings for Bradner’s HR department.** While identifying qualified applicants used to take the HR manager approximately eight hours, it now takes approximately two (a 75 percent time savings). In addition, 95 percent of interviewed candidates are offered jobs—a 55 percent improvement in identifying qualified applicants.

WAGE

- Employers in El Dorado, Arkansas, signed memoranda of understanding giving added consideration for jobs and promotions to WAGE certified candidates.
- Some employers in Arkansas waive entrance tests for job applicants with the WAGE industrial certificate.

Work Certified

- The Work Certified “employee certificate” is preferred, but not required, for entry-level positions at Big Five Tours and Expeditions, a luxury tour company with 15+ employees.
- The one Work Certified hire has been with Big Five since August 2003.
- The company’s help wanted ads for entry-level positions (e.g., receptionist) mention a preference for Work Certified program graduates. This preference is based on Work Certified’s certificate holders having a better understanding of company operations, a more positive attitude on the job, and higher levels of reading, writing, and math skills than those who have not participated.

There is very little indication that employers ask for most of these certificates. In fact, when Jobs for the Future contacted some companies cited by certificate programs as endorsing their credentials, HR representatives had to be reminded of the certificate or had hired only one person with the certificate. When probed, they agreed that the certificate seemed to do a good job at documenting job readiness, but they declined to make it a hiring criterion or to give preference—financial or otherwise—to certificate holders. Anecdotal evidence based on Jobs for the Future’s experience with a number of workforce development programs across the country seems to indicate that WorkKeys is the certificate most widely used and recognized by employers.

State Sponsorship of Work Readiness Certificates

States that adopt certification systems generally adopt two approaches: one credential may become a uniform exit standard from all pre-employment or adult literacy programs; or the state offers assistance in training staff and employer outreach for locally selected certificates.

Some states, like Arkansas, have developed their own certificates to guide all workforce development service providers in setting completion standards. This offers the state an opportunity to “brand” its programs to employers as having recognizably high standards, regardless of which local program awards the certificate. The certificate is, however, only branded in the home state.

Some certificates, like Work Certified, have been developed by entrepreneurial service providers such as Workforce Investment Boards. These certificates have the

advantage of being customized to the workforce development system, and they generally have built in follow-up systems to track outcomes, which adds to their value as management tools for the workforce development system. The certifying body, however, does not have name recognition outside of its region. Nor do local WIBs have the technical resources for curriculum design or test construction and validation that national certifying bodies can offer.

Three of the certificates reviewed here are offered by a national certifying body: Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System has developed the Workforce Skills Certification System; ACT offers WorkKeys; and the National Work Readiness Council is introducing the National Work Readiness Credential. National certification bodies offer certificates that are validated and have some name recognition in multiple states and jurisdictions, which may increase their perceived value with job seekers and with employers.

Rather than endorsing a single certificate, many states, including California, Florida, and Washington, promote work readiness certificates in general and encourage service providers to view them as complementary to one another. This approach avoids the risks in promoting a credential that may not meet the needs of a particular labor market, while offering employers and service providers a recognizable documentation of certificate-holder skills. The downside is that the range of skills reflected in different certificates may not be an improvement over the status quo in reducing confusion and assuring employers of the relevance of program outcomes to their needs. Why not just market the state’s workforce development services directly, rather than investing?

Choosing a single credential for statewide adoption also carries both risks and benefits. A single credential is easier to market and easier for state agencies to monitor and promote. However, it carries the risk of missing the mark in choosing the most appropriate certificate. Certificates with high literacy standards may exclude a significant proportion of the population intended to benefit from them; those with lower literacy standards may not satisfy employers with jobs that offer good wages and advancement opportunities. And the success of soft skills certification in improving job placement outcomes is poorly documented.

Jobs for the Future’s research did not find any independent reports or studies that demonstrated the ability of any certificate to attract new jobs to the state or to increase

the wages or job placement rates of low-skilled/low income individuals. We did find testimonials from WIB staff, state administrators, and program operators on the value of having a common vocabulary and standard outcome measures across programs with diverse missions, such as adult literacy, workforce training, and vocational rehabilitation. These testimonials applied especially to the Workforce Skills Certification System, which provides a set of tools to document achievement at levels ranging from pre-literate to college, and provides a database of instructional materials and resources linked to specific competency outcomes.

Assessing Costs and Benefits

States interested in administering certificates should be realistic about the capacity of the organizations that would be responsible for implementing the certification process. Do they have the staff, technology, and administrative capacity they will need to implement the program with the high standards needed for it to be credible to employers and to job seekers? Successful certification programs must do many things, such as offering job readiness training, applying high outcome standards uniformly, referring unsuccessful candidates to further training, marketing the certificate to employers, orienting certificate holders on how to use the certificate as a job search aid, communicating with WIBs and other organizations, and tracking program data. Few of the financially strapped community organizations that are the primary delivery arms of state training programs have the

resources to provide staff development training, retool their curricula to align with the certificate outcome standards, purchase the assessment tools, and so forth. State resources will be necessary for these tasks if quality standards are to be achieved.

Employer buy-in is also essential. Persistent and sustained promotion of any certificate adopted statewide will be necessary to engage employers and maintain their interest in it. In this case, promotion means more than a marketing campaign, although statewide marketing to employers will be important. The state should also follow up with employers who have hired certificate holders to ascertain their satisfaction and continued willingness to use the certificate in hiring decisions. The state will need a tracking system to document the benefits of the certificate to employers, and it must be able to use this data in ongoing marketing. Since benefits to employers will be in cost-savings through more efficient hiring processes and reduced turnover, the state will need to develop a methodology to collect data on streamlined hiring decisions and improved job retention of certificate holders. The state also should adopt a continuous improvement monitoring process that uses outcome data to analyze where the certificate program needs assistance to maintain the high quality needed to remain credible to employers.

Implementing a certification program carries significant costs for licensing, staff training, and testing materials (see Table 3). Over and above the thousands of dollars in

Table 3. Selected Certification Program Costs

	WAGE	Workforce Skills Certification System	Work Certified	WorkKeys	National Work Readiness Credential
Membership/ license fee	NA	none	Package fee of \$5,000-\$15,000 per year, plus marketing materials and presentation fees	\$100/site	\$300/site
Staff training	NA	\$3,000/25 people		NA	\$25/proctor
Test administration	NA	\$360/25 tests		\$12	\$65/person
Software	NA	\$55		NA	None
Other	NA	Teacher Guide \$7 Student Guide \$20 Test Manual \$75		Fees negotiated with state	
NA = Not available					

software, staff training, and licensing fees charged by most programs (with the exception of the National Work Readiness Credential, which does not expect to set such fees), there is a test fee of anywhere from \$12 to \$65 for each person tested. According to a 2005 report to the Colorado Workforce Development Council prepared by Susan Blansett and Mary Gershwin, other states looking

at this question have estimated costs of \$1 million to \$5 million over a five-year period for marketing, staffing, evaluation and test administration. Any state considering the adoption of a statewide credentialing system should weigh the expected value of the certificate against these costs, and determine if the funds might be better invested in marketing, monitoring, and improving existing workforce development programs.

Recommendations

Based on research into various certificate programs and Jobs for the Future's experience with workforce development programs, we have found little to suggest that work readiness certificates of any kind lead to long term improvements in the earnings or career advancement of low-skilled job seekers comparable to the impact of a high school diploma or post secondary education. If a state is nevertheless interested in a rapid turn-around credential for low-skilled job seekers, we suggest several criteria to guide decisions on implementing a statewide work readiness credential.

Ensure that the credentials are valued and used by employers.

Are both large and small employers asking for a credential other than a high school diploma/GED? It may be useful to seek commitments from supportive employers that they will use certificates in hiring decisions in order to demonstrate to job seekers that the credential is valuable. Some job ads state a preference for applicants with a particular certificate. At the same time, it is important that certificate-holders are informed about how to promote their certificate. Some programs report that certificate-holders fail to inform prospective employers that they are certified, undermining the value of providing the resource.

Commit to marketing and quality monitoring.

The value of the certificate will depend on its name recognition and its association with quality. Prepare to spend resources on marketing the credential and in documenting its value to employers and job seekers.

Leverage the participation and support of a diverse group of stakeholders.

Employers, community-based organizations, the K-12 system, community colleges, and the One-Stop Centers should be engaged in adopting the system to enhance, not replace, current outcome standards. The broader the uptake of a credential across the workforce development and education systems, the more likely it is to be embraced by job seekers and employers.

Select a credentialing system that is easy to administer and implement.

Determine whether you want a stand-alone test that can be administered to anyone who walks into a One-Stop Center or community agency looking for a job, or by a job readiness program with a curriculum that helps program operators across the state apply uniform outcome standards.

Use your target population as your guide for the kind of certificate you endorse.

Who are you targeting and for what? Low-literacy residents? Entry-level jobs? Jobs with career advancement potential? Do the employers you are targeting care more about literacy or soft skills?

Adopt a system that accommodates the accessibility needs of underserved populations.

An Internet-based system provides better accessibility and flexibility. Most systems are moving in this direction but only WorkKeys and the National Work Readiness Credential are fully computerized for both test administration and scoring.

Analyze testing instruments for terminology and bias.

Certificates that document standards such as "personal hygiene" may sound demeaning to some job seekers, who might then be reluctant to use them. It is advisable that certificate programs teach and emphasize general workplace standards, using concepts that are empowering, not disparaging. In addition, some of the sample exercises used in program curricula present scenarios that may not reflect realistic workplace expectations (e.g., placing loyalty to the employer ahead of loyalty to colleagues).

If a statewide system is adopted, invest in building the capacity of the organizations that will implement it.

All certification systems require an investment in training staff members who are using the system, a cost that should be borne at the state level to assure that agencies take advantage of the training. Further, the state needs to invest in an oversight system to ensure that trainers/teachers perform well and meet program standards.

Include a well-planned evaluation system that provides cost/benefit data.

An outcome tracking system that is accessible across state agencies should be developed so that the K-12 system, higher education, community-based organizations and One-Stop Centers report comparable outcomes, including the value to employers. The accountability system of Florida's Workforce Development Board of the Treasure Coast could serve as a model.

Allocate significant financial resources to implement the system statewide.

Most states report minimal employer support for employer-fee-based systems, and assigning test costs to participants, particularly low-income participants, will minimize their interest in the certificate. Thus, the state must identify resources from among the sponsoring state systems to support space needs, marketing, staffing, test administration, oversight, and evaluation.

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Interviews

Jobs for the Future thanks the following individuals who generously shared their experiences and insight from the field through interviews in person and by phone.

Loretta Ball, Office Manager, CSI Marine, Florida

Christopher (Kip) Bergstrom, Executive Director, Rhode Island Economic Policy Council

Sheila Boyington, President, Thinking Media, Tennessee

Victoria Choitz, Senior Policy Analyst, FutureWorks, Massachusetts

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Gail Shrum, Coordinator, Arkansas County WAGE Program, Workforce Alliance for Growth in the Economy

Sondra Stein, Consultant, National Work Readiness Council

David Sweaney, Senior WorkKeys Consultant

Judy Titzel, Consultant, Rhode Island Economic Policy Council

Ray Wofford, Adult Education and WAGE Instructor, Arkansas County Adult Education

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Arkansas State Government: www.arkansas.gov

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CASTLE Worldwide, Inc.: www.castleworldwide.com

Dynamic Works Institute: www.dynamicinstitute.com

Junior Achievement/JA Worldwide: www.ja.org

KeyTrain/SAI Interactive, Inc.: www.keytrain.com

Workforce Development Board of the Treasure Coast: www.tcjobs.org

U.S. Chamber of Commerce: www.uschamber.com

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